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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000840

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KREF](#) [IO](#) [IZ](#) [IR](#)
SUBJECT: MEK DEFECTOR GOES TO TURKEY DUE TO LIMITED ICRC
AND UNHCR SUPPORT

REF: A. BAGHDAD 405
[1](#)B. 08 ANKARA 1270

Classified By: Political Military Minister Counselor Michael Corbin for
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (S/NF) Summary: Frustrated at the restrictive support provided to him in Iraq and afraid of returning to Iran, one of the two current Mujahedin e-Khalq (MEK) defectors has moved to Istanbul. ICRC met regularly with the defectors (most recently on March 12) and offered to assist them to return to Iran, but has also made clear that it cannot monitor (i.e., protect) them on a daily basis in Iran. UNHCR met with the defectors for the first time on March 15 and warned them that they would face lengthy delays, possibly up to a few years, if they sought resettlement through UNHCR. The fed-up defector took his Iranian Embassy-issued passport and \$1,000 from the GOI and flew to Turkey. However, he told us that he is not happy and has no support in Istanbul. There was no coordination between the GOI and GOT on this issue, which will likely cause an issue between Turkey and Iraq (as it has in the past with MEK refugees). Travel to Turkey is not a solution for the 3400 MEK residents of Camp Ashraf. End Summary.

MEK DEFECTOR GOES TO TURKEY

[1](#)2. (S/NF) Tired of living in a hotel room and frustrated with the limited support offered by ICRC and UNHCR, Mekki Rafii, one of the two Mujahedin e-Khalq (MEK) defectors, left Baghdad on March 19 and went to Istanbul (rumors of this trip were reported in ref A). The GOI's MEK committee, headed by National Security Advisor (NSA) Muwaffaq al-Rubaie, gave him \$1,000 and his passport, which had been recently issued by the Iranian Embassy. The committee, including Ministry of Human Rights (MoHR) representatives, escorted him to the airport. Mekki called MoHR officials from the hotel in Turkey and allegedly said he was happy and that the trip had gone smoothly. However, he called us a few days later and said he is not happy and has no support or contacts with NGOs in Turkey. Minister of Human Rights Wijdan Salim told us on March 22 that she was concerned about the impact on GOI-GOT relations of sending MEK members to Turkey and discussed the possible consequences with the NSA, who she said stated the issue would not be a problem. We emphasized that this would certainly be a problem, and the GOI should understand clearly that sending MEK members to Turkey was not a solution.

[1](#)3. (C) The second defector, Abbas Badfar, is still at the Rasheed hotel in the International Zone. He is afraid to leave for Turkey and refuses to return to Iran. However, MoHR officials think he will go to Turkey after hearing that Mekki is doing well. The GOI committee has Abbas's passport and is encouraging him to go to Turkey and stay with Mekki. The committee is also discussing other possibilities for

housing the defectors; the bill for Mekki at the Rasheed hotel was \$19,000 for less than a two-month stay.

LIMITED ICRC SUPPORT FOR REPATRIATION TO IRAN

¶4. (C) On March 12, Minister Salim told PolOff that Mekki had decided to return to Iran with assistance from the ICRC and MoHR, who would have accompanied him. ICRC confirmed to PolOff on March 14 that ICRC Iraq would assist with sending Mekki to Iran, and that ICRC Iran would facilitate his arrival. ICRC emphasized that while it would be able to monitor Mekki en route to Iran and for a short period after his arrival, ICRC does not have the capacity to monitor Mekki's safety in Iran on an ongoing basis. ICRC officials said they would do everything possible to follow his case, but there were no guarantees they would have adequate access to him since ICRC has less freedom to move around Iran than Iraq.

¶5. (C) ICRC received approval from the Iranian Embassy in Baghdad to repatriate Mekki during a meeting on March 10, and the Embassy had been waiting for final approval from Tehran. ICRC confirmed this plan with Mekki during their March 12 meeting; however, Mekki changed his mind the next day, saying he was too scared to go without daily ICRC monitoring of his safety in Iran. ICRC told Mekki that the Iranian authorities had reiterated commitments of safety, and ICRC would not repatriate anyone if ICRC thought there were safety risks. Mekki said he wanted instead to pursue options of resettlement to a third country with UNHCR. ICRC and UNHCR

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have consistently made clear to Iraqi officials that they will only support repatriation that is fully voluntary.

UNHCR LENGTHY RESETTLEMENT ASSISTANCE

¶6. (C) Carolyn Ennis, senior Protection Officer for UNHCR Iraq operations, met with the two defectors on March 15 at the Rasheed hotel and counseled them on their situation and options. Ennis told them UNHCR could protect them as "asylum seekers" but warned them that UNHCR cannot assure a speedy and durable solution. She told Mekki and Abbas that many asylum seekers, in particular former MEK members, had faced long delays in resettlement and future delays could be expected. Ennis did not give them a time estimate but said it could take years.

¶7. (C) According to the NSA official who was present at the meeting, Ennis was quite blunt with the defectors and did not leave them with much hope of being resettled soon. Ennis told PolOff that she was trying to dispel unrealistic expectations that recognition as refugees by UNHCR would result in prompt resettlement. According to ICRC, Mekki called ICRC after this meeting and said he would not pursue the resettlement option with UNHCR because it would take too long.

COMMENT

¶8. (S/NF) As noted last month when GOI plans for sending MEK defectors to Turkey became clear, a lack of coordination with the Turkish government over resettlement of MEK defectors in Turkey or transit through Turkey is an issue. The arrival in Turkey in 2008 of 45 former MEK members outraged the Turkish government (ref B), and it is still unclear how the GOI plans to handle any new GOT fallout as a result of MEK members or defectors traveling to Turkey. We will continue to make clear to the GOI that this is not an

option that the USG can support, and that it may backfire on the GOI if MEK members are deported back to Iraq from Turkey.

19. (C) It is noteworthy that the Iranian Embassy (although not yet Tehran) moved forward on the possibility of repatriating one of the MEK defectors given that Iran had been stalling ICRC on repatriation of Ashraf refugee camp defectors over the past year (ref A).
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